

# 1919-1950: The politics of Surrealism



A history of Surrealism and its links with politics and, in particular, anarchism and socialism.

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But why had not the Surrealists associated themselves before 1947 with the ideas of revolutionary anarchism? This radical art movement which had a fierce hatred of authority and religion was a natural ally. Indeed the art movement of Dada, in many ways a precursor and influence on Surrealism, had emerged in Zurich in 1916 as a reaction to the savagery and slaughter of the World War. Breton himself was influenced by the poet Jacques Vache whom he met in 1919. Breton was to note in the same 1952 article that: "At that time, the surrealist refusal was total, and absolutely incapable of allowing itself to be channelled at a political



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level. All the institutions upon which the modern world rested-and which had just shown their worth in the First World War - were considered aberrant and scandalous to us. To begin with, it was the entire defence apparatus of society that we were attacking: the army, 'justice', the police, religion, psychiatric and legal medicine, and schooling". He went on to demand:

"Why was an organic fusion not operated at this moment between anarchist and surrealist elements?" and explained " It was undoubtedly the idea of efficiency, which was the delusion of that period, that decided otherwise. What we took to be the triumph of the Russian Revolution and the advent of a workers' state led to a great change in our outlook. The only dark spot in the picture - which became an indelible stain - was the crushing of the Kronstadt insurrection of 18 March 1921."

## **Solidarity**

The surrealists had not hesitated in 1923 in showing solidarity with the young anarchist woman Germaine Berton who had killed an activist of the extreme right nationalist party L'Action Francaise and who was acquitted in a jury trial! Another member of the surrealist group, Robert Desnos, had associated with the individualist anarchist circles of Victor Serge and Rirette Maitrejean, whilst according to a police record, the surrealist poet Benjamin Peret had been active in an anarchist group in the Paris region and had contributed to the anarchist paper *Le Libertaire*. All the surrealists attentively read the anarchist press in this period.

However, they were put off by the incoherence of the French movement and remembered how some had supported the Allied effort in the World War. When Breton took over as editor of the review *La Revolution Surrealiste* from Antonin Artaud he wrote most of the collective texts like the revolutionary *Open the Prisons! Disband the Armies!*

The Surrealists also leapt to the defence of the young woman Violette Noziere who had poisoned her father. Violette accused her father of having systematically raped her from the age of 12. The Surrealists used the trial to denounce the bourgeois family and bourgeois hypocrisy.

In January 1927 5 members of the Surrealist group joined the Communist Party: Breton, Aragon, Eluard, Unik and Peret. Others, like Desnos and Miro refused to join. Even with Breton, Party membership was with qualifications. He saw the Communist programme as only a minimum programme, and criticised the Party paper as "Puerile, uselessly declamatory, cretinous, unreadable; completely unworthy of the role of proletarian education that it tries to assume". Whilst Aragon transformed from the "most libertarian spirit of the Surrealist group" into a horrific Stalinist hack who wrote poems honouring the Russian secret police the NKVD, others who had joined the Party began to feel distinctly uncomfortable about the Moscow show trials. It was a stormy period for the Surrealists as they tried to participate as they saw it in the workers' revolution, whilst at the same time safeguarding their own specific preoccupations, and fighting against the Party leadership's attempts to keep them on a tight rein. Breton was expelled in 1933, and at a Party-controlled International Congress for the Defence of Culture the Surrealists were denounced and were only allowed to speak on the last day at 2 in the morning!

## **Trotsky**

By now some of the Surrealists were allying with Trotskyism and oppositional Bolshevism.

Peret made contact in France and Brazil with the Communist Union and the Internationalist Workers Party. Breton made contact in Mexico with Trotsky when he was put in charge of a series of conferences at Mexico University on Poetry and Painting in Europe in 1938.

Together with Trotsky and the Mexican painter Diego Rivera he drafted *For an*

*Independent Revolutionary Art* which announced that "The revolution is obliged to erect a socialist regime with central planning; for intellectual creation it must, even from the start, establish an anarchist regime of intellectual liberty. No constraint, not the least trace of command". This

contradictory and bizarre document seems to have been written by Breton and amazingly Trotsky, with Rivera substituting for Trotsky's signature when he got cold feet. It is not clear when Trotsky helped write this document what he thought he was doing, as it went against everything he had ever done or said.

## **Durruti**

Peret for his part had gone as delegate of the Internationalist Workers Party to the Civil War and Revolution in Spain. Here he worked as a radio broadcaster for the anti-Stalinist Marxist party the POUM, but left this post when he criticised this organisation for participating in the Catalan government. He joined the anarchist Durruti Column on the Aragon front. "All collaboration with the POUM was impossible, they wanted very much to accept people to their right, but not to their left. I have decided to enter into an anarchist militia, and here I am at the front, at Pino de Ebro", he wrote to Breton. Two years later he paid tribute to Buenaventura Durruti, after whom the Column was named. "I have always seen in Durruti the most revolutionary anarchist leader, whose attitude was most violently opposed to the capitulations of the anarchists who had entered the government and his killing moved me very much. I think that the lesson that was the life of Durruti should not be lost." Returning to France, he was called up at the start of the war. He was arrested for distribution of leaflets of

"an anarchist character" and after a prison term managed to escape to Mexico. Here he undertook a thoroughgoing critique of Trotskyism and distanced himself from its organisations. Writing later in a letter to Georges Fontenis, the French libertarian communist militant, he remarked: "If the disappearance of the State can not be envisaged in the immediate, it is no less true that the proletarian insurrection must mark the the first day of the death agony of the State".

## **Arrogance**

After the War the Surrealists began to collaborate with the Federation Anarchiste. Fontenis and another militant of the FA, Serge Ninn, maintained

good contacts with the Surrealists, the former becoming a friend of Breton. In 1951, the Surrealist started to write a regular weekly column in *Le Libertaire - Le Billet Surrealiste*. A series of articles by Peret were also published in *Le Libertaire* which characterised the unions as counter-revolutionary organisms and put forward workers councils as an alternative. The FA were in disagreement with him on this and published a reply in the paper. Peret was certainly in advance of French anarchists on this question. The controversy here was fraternal, but in a later Billet the Surrealist Jean Schuster insisted that the Surrealists should take charge of the intellectual struggle, whilst the anarchists got on with the economic and social struggle. This elitist arrogance stirred up a lot of trouble, and the relationship between the Surrealists and the anarchists began to cool and the last *Billet* appeared in *Le Libertaire* in January 1953.

The article *Poet, that is to say Revolutionary* written by Peret, the most politicised and revolutionary of the Surrealists, that appeared in the paper in 1951 said the essential. He showed up to what point poetry is revolutionary but he added: "It does not follow that the (the poet) puts poetry at the service of political action, even if it is revolutionary," (Which was certainly never the wish of the anarchist militants of the period) . "But his quality of poet makes him a revolutionary who must struggle on every terrain: that of poetry by his own means and on the terrain of social action , without ever confusing the two fields of action".

## **Synthesis**

Apart from Breton and Peret the other Surrealists were never seen on the field of social action. Breton was consistent in his support for the Federation Anarchiste and he continued to offer his solidarity after the Platformists around Fontenis transformed the FA into the Federation Communiste Libertaire. He was one of the few intellectuals who continued to offer his support to the FCL during the Algerian war when the FCL suffered severe

repression and was forced underground. He sheltered Fontenis whilst he was in hiding. He refused to take sides on the splits in the French anarchist movement and both he and Peret expressed solidarity as well with the new FA set up by the synthesist anarchists and worked in the Antifascist Committees of the 60s alongside the FA.

Some were able to synthesise anarchism and Surrealism on an individual level

even if it had not happened on a collective level. The poet Jehan Mayoux, great friend of Peret, the son of anarchists and anti-militarists, joined the Surrealists at the end of the 20s. Called up at the start of the war, he went AWOL and was imprisoned. Escaping, he was captured by the Germans and sent to a concentration camp from which he was liberated in 1945. He continued to take part in libertarian activity up to his death. Jean-Claude Tertrais participated in Surrealist activities in the 50s whilst Breton was still alive. Called up during the Algerian war, he went AWOL and was sent to the hellish "Disciplinary Battalions". He joined the FA on his release, contributing articles on surrealism to the FA paper *Le Monde Libertaire*.

However, as Fontenis was to remark: "It is true that, too often, poets are just poets, without being really revolutionary, no insult to B. Peret intended, and if sometimes they attach themselves to the movement of the masses they often fixate on individual high deeds, on spectacular subversion, on illegalist deeds, rather than on the hard daily struggles... As much as it is preferable that the libertarian movement stays intimately linked to the spirit of revolt of the poets, as much it is prejudicial to subject its revolutionary views to the fantasies of men of letters. Yes to implacable revolt, yes to insurrection, yes to the libertarian spirit... but is this a reason to leave on the side the anarchist thought and the class action that nourishes it and that it inspires?"

### **Further notes**

Other criticisms can be made of Surrealism - the individual intolerance and authoritarianism of Breton, the sexism and homophobia, the cod Freudianism, the dubious celebration of sexual violence - but that would require an article in itself.

Whatever you do read Breton's *Claire Tour* - his enthusiastic ode to anarchism. It's been translated into English as *The Lighthouse in the Drunken Boat*, an anthology of writings on anarchism and art available from Freedom and AK Press.

*By Nick Heath, edited by libcom*